



WAY ON DOWN

One of the world's leading underwater photographers, **Stephen Frink**, talks to **Rachael D'Cruze** about his journey from a landlocked upbringing in Illinois to the Florida Keys, his lucky break, making a living and the secrets behind his underwater shots.

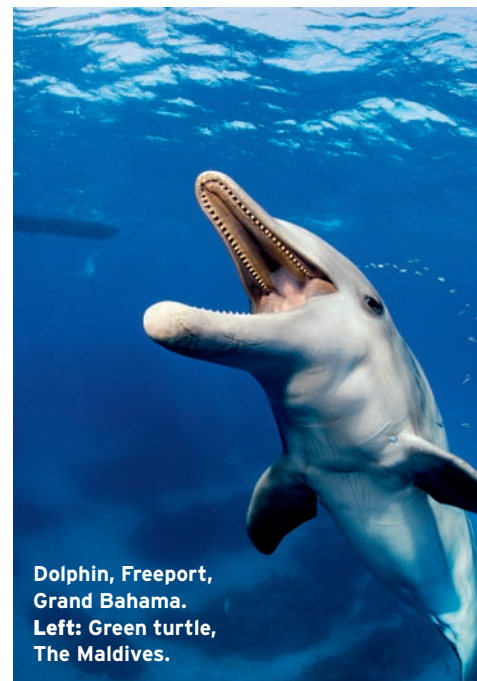


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STEPHEN FRINK

You might assume that underwater photographer Stephen Frink grew up by water and learnt to dive at an early age. In fact Stephen was brought up in America's landlocked Mid-West, where a relationship with the ocean wasn't possible. However, he did swim competitively for 13 years,

all the way through college. Graduate school saw him move to California, where he studied psychology and had some spare time, so he took a photography class as well. "The magic of black-and-white processing was compelling. The photography hook came first and the diving came later," says Stephen, who later became a certified scuba diver – something he had to do to get a part-time job cleaning boats at a marina.



**Dolphin, Freeport, Grand Bahama.
Left: Green turtle, The Maldives.**

After completing his masters degree, Stephen went to live in Kona, Hawaii. "I got a crummy job taking pictures of drunk tourists at night. It gave me enough money to live on and, more importantly, as nothing happened until sunset, I had the days to practise my diving and have fun." Stephen's next move saw him drop out of diving and move to the mountains, becoming a commercial photography lab technician. While in the Florida Keys visiting an old friend from his high school swimming days, Stephen saw nobody was processing there. "I ended up renting a little bit of a dive shop, to process film and rent out cameras to tourists," he says. This was in 1978 and the next two years were all about Stephen teaching himself the art of underwater photography, while working in retail. "I was able to see the results of my shoots the same day, as I was processing the images myself."

He got his lucky break when *Dive* magazine's scheduled visit to the Florida Keys to do a feature was hit by the weather. "It was cheaper for them to send me than somebody from out of town. I'd never shot wide-angle before, although I knew that's what I needed to do for the dive mags," says Stephen who borrowed a lens, and found himself a willing model at the diving shop and got on with it. The next week the magazine sent him on assignment somewhere else; regular work and a column followed. "If I had blown that chance I wouldn't be where I am today."

Stephen has previously worked for *Scuba Diving* magazine as director of photography, and as a contributing photographer for *Skin Diver* magazine for 17 years. He is now the publisher of *Alert Diver*, a new quarterly magazine for the Divers Alert Network. "Most of what I do has an ▶



Queen angelfish, Key Largo, the Florida Keys.



Southern stingray, Grand Bahama.

editorial nature. I get my fair share of commercial and catalogue work too – which is good as it feeds my stock photography business at the same time,” he says, referring to his stock photo agency, Stephen Frink Collection. His varied client base includes Canon, Nikon, Victoria’s Secret, Aqua Lung, Oceanic, Scubapro, Subgear, Mercury Marine, Jantzen swimwear, Alcan Aluminium, Seaquest, Henderson Aquatics, Neo Sport, American Express, Rolex, Club Med and numerous resorts and live-aboard diving boats throughout the world.

So, what makes all these big names commission Stephen ahead of other professional underwater photographers? “My pictures of people differentiate me from other underwater photographers. I can shoot critters and I do, but I’m not as compelled as I am when it comes to shooting people.” He says his early stock work, showing people having fun in the ocean – which sold well – has heavily influenced his photography. Few underwater photographers specialise in underwater portraiture, so this truly is Stephen’s

niche. “I couldn’t be a street photographer, approaching strangers and getting in their personal space, but when I’m working with a model, we both know it’s our job to get the best shot.”

He explains that shooting people underwater needs completely different skills from capturing marine life – the strobes, lenses and shooting distances are all different and crucially you have to be able to communicate with your model and make them want to perform for the camera. Stephen has a set of signals which he teaches models before they go underwater. He also makes a specific sound when he wants the model to look at the camera, so he can tell them if he is changing picture orientation etc, as it’s typical for him to be shooting them interacting with underwater life. “Last Saturday I was working with a model who had a haircut that looked great on the surface, but rubbish underwater, as it just kept standing up on end. I took my hood off and then shook my head to the left and then the right so they could see the natural flow caused by the movement and do the same,” says Stephen, illustrating how he

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With an affordable camera, such as the Canon PowerShot G12, you can go to depths, use a strobe and take serious underwater pictures.” He explains that while shutter lag on early digital cameras was a real problem, the lag times that we get now are workable. Stephen also advises against using anything with a built-in flash, as the light produced is just too close.

Light is the most important aspect of any genre of photography, perhaps especially in underwater work. As water is about 800 times denser than air,

the particles in the water between the front of the lens and the subject look pronounced and distracting, and also create a colour bias. So, as well as trying to minimise the amount of water between front of lens and subject, you need to use artificial light to achieve colour, unless you’re shooting at the very surface. “Colour is lost as a function of depth in the water and artificial light will restore this. You always need to get close to make up for the colour loss too,” says Stephen, who explains that because all underwater



overcomes communication difficulties underwater. Digital photography has made life a lot easier for him in this respect too, as he can simply show the models the back of the camera underwater, giving them an idea of how he is compositing and lighting the photos.

He has the accolade of being made a Canon Explorer of Light – an elite group of photographers who are invited by the manufacturer to talk about their craft at major consumer shows. “It’s a reward for being both a good shooter and being willing to share your knowledge,” says Stephen, who shoots with Canon EOS-1Ds MkIII, 1D MkIV and 5D MkII bodies with Canon 15mm, 16-35 II, 14mm II, 24-70mm, 100mm macro, 70-200mm f/4, 100-400mm and Sigma 50mm macro lenses, Seacam underwater housings and ports, and Ikelite underwater strobes. While his success affords him the best gear, Stephen quite rightly points out that digital photography has made underwater photography much more accessible. “I’d say we’re in a watershed moment for underwater photography.

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Christ of the Abyss,
Key Largo, the
Florida Keys.



This shot of a springboard diver warming up was taken at the Orange Bowl Classic swim meet in Key Largo.



Caribbean reef sharks,
Stuart Cove's Dive
Bahamas, Nassau.



BIOGRAPHY

Stephen Frink's work has appeared in *Scuba Diving* magazine and been commissioned by Canon, Nikon, Victoria's Secret, Aqua Lung and Oceanic, among others. Stephen publishes *Alert Diver*, a new quarterly

magazine for the Divers Alert Network, and is the author of a coffee table book, *Wonders of the Reef*. He teaches masters level courses at the Stephen Frink School of Underwater Digital Imaging in the Florida Keys.

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photography needs to be lit artificially, you can shoot at any time of day, or even night.

He talks about the 'field of light', which is the proximity you need to get to marine life for a quality picture and how close the marine life will let you approach. "It's a fine line and it's intuitive," says Stephen, who explains that each type of fish is different – whereas those found on coral reefs are generally skittish, others are more tolerant and allow you to get close.

Understanding the physics of underwater photography, becoming proficient in lighting underwater with strobes, is crucial, but more importantly you need to ensure you stay safe below the surface and don't sacrifice your health for the sake of a few extra frames. "I've been in re-compression chambers at least four times from the bends, related to being so enraptured with underwater photography that I pushed the limits too aggressively." In the end, getting the bends repeatedly gained him a few extra minutes underwater but cost him months in recovery.

When it comes to technical matters he says: "I teach people how to light a subject underwater, but I don't think you can really teach composition. To compose what you see in your mind's eye, you need to be technically perfect." He teaches masters level courses at the Stephen Frink School of Underwater Digital Imaging, in his home waters of Key Largo, in the Florida Keys. He also has a diving travel company, WaterHouse Tours and Reservations. He says running these tours challenges him, and allows him to go to places he wants to visit but which he wouldn't necessarily be sent to, and to build his stock library. "We go away for a week or 10 days, on a live-aboard boat and dive four times a day, away from phones and email. I'm refreshed creatively and able to add to my stock photo files," says Stephen, who has just got back from a tour of the Philippines. "I started my tours in 1982, when I wanted to go to the Pacific, so I set it up. Since then I've offered the tour two or three times a year."

Knowing where to capture the best pictures is obviously an important part of being able to run successful photography tours and Stephen explains it's also crucial to his business in general. "We know where to go to get the best pictures, to fulfil briefs. We find the destinations and already know the operators there." He employs a travel coordinator as well as a retail and studio manager, and is a fan of being economical in terms of time spent on location. "I'd rather be efficient and move on," he says. This is obviously beneficial to clients in these cost-conscious times. "Usually if I'm shooting something for a catalogue, say a wetsuit, I'll just go ahead and travel to where I'm going to shoot, taking the product with me. This is cheaper

for them and works because my clients trust me to shoot the products in the best place." But when it comes to big projects, Stephen prefers art directors to come on location with him, as their expertise with a particular product is always invaluable above water and they know exactly what they want his pictures to show.

With his editorial and commercial work, stock business, photography school seminar in the summer and tours company going out around three times per year, Stephen Frink is an incredibly busy photographer. "I know myself – I need projects," he says. And so he should; he has been a professional photographer since 1974 and he just keeps on getting better at his craft. **TP**

STEPHEN'S ADVICE FOR SUCCESSFUL UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHY

- 1** GET CLOSE - Water is about 800 times denser than air, contains distracting particles and has a colour bias. You need to minimise the amount of water between front of lens and subject.
- 2** USE ARTIFICIAL LIGHT - You need artificial light to achieve colour, because colour is lost the deeper you go underwater.
- 3** ACQUIRE GOOD DIVING SKILLS - The most important thing is to be comfortable and safe in the water, and have buoyancy skills to avoid damaging the coral reef.
- 4** DIVE SAFELY - It's far better to avoid injury than to be greedy in pursuit of imaging opportunities.
- 5** GET TO KNOW THE MARINE LIFE - It's important to understand the behaviour of the marine life you are trying to photograph. This is not to say you must be a marine biologist but having keen observational skills helps in locating the subject and having a benign, non-threatening approach.
- 6** COMMUNICATE - Cultivate communication with those you might wish to photograph underwater. Good interpersonal skills when working with models are very important.
- 7** GO GLOBAL - Have a good working knowledge of where the worldwide photo opportunities might be, and in what seasons.
- 8** BE DILIGENT ABOUT MAINTAINING EQUIPMENT - The ocean is harsh and corrosive, so regular fresh water rinsing and proper maintenance of gear is imperative.
- 9** RESPECT AND APPRECIATE LOCAL KNOWLEDGE - This is the gateway to the best marine life behaviours, so tip well.
- 10** TRAVEL WITH BACKUP GEAR - Accept that sometimes cords, batteries or chargers may break, and you'll need spares. It may not be practical to carry spares for every bit of equipment we travel with, but be handy enough to repair what can be fixed in the field, and be prescient enough to carry spares for anything that may break but which you are unable to repair.
- 11** EDIT EFFICIENTLY - Create an image editing workflow that allows quick editing in the field.
- 12** BACKUP - Make sure all your files are backed up on redundant drives that travel in separate luggage.
- 13** THINK LOGICALLY - Be diligent in terms of creating a post-production archive so that images can be retrieved on demand.
- 14** SPEED MATTERS - Use the most efficient software to process from RAW to high-res or web view resolutions on demand, quickly.
- 15** GET MODEL RELEASES - Make sure you have permission to use images of people if you ever intend to enter the commercial photography realm. Many agencies won't consider images without proper release forms.